The Required reading for Entering Systemic Functional Linguistics: A review of *Systemic Functional Grammar: A First Step into the Theory*

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Abstract— *This article introduces the book Systemic Functional Grammar: A First Step into the Theory by Christian M.I.M. Matthiessen and M.A.K. Halliday, overviewing its contents and features. This book has involved the research fields, research models, key terms, and the origin and developmental stages of Systemic Functional Linguistics, which is the required reading to enter this filed of linguistics study and is significant for beginners.*

Keywords— *systemic functional linguistics; introductory book; research models*

I. INTRODUCTION

Systemic Functional Grammar: A First Step into the Theory by Matthiessen & Halliday (2009) comes out with its translated Chinese version published by Higher Education Press. Its significance consists in its introduction of the research paradigms, core terms, research content, and the origin and development processes of Systemic Functional Linguistics. However, no scholars have yet provided a review of the book. This article, therefore, is intended to review the contents of this book and then offer a brief comment on it.

Systemic functional linguistics (hereafter, SFL) has had a significant impact in China, and its influence is increasingly growing internationally. However, as compared with such schools as Transformative-Generative grammar, SFL has yet to become mainstream in developed countries (Yang 2018). Therefore, the development of SFL requires fresh blood from this filed. However, there are too many relevant specialized books with varying levels of difficulty and differing focuses, making it difficult for beginners to follow and even causing them to give up further learning. For these reasons, this book introduces the research paradigms and basic concepts of SFL, providing further reading suggestions. For example, beginners are suggested to read Bloor & Bloor (2013), Thompson (2013), and Halliday (1994) or Halliday & Matthiessen (2004; 2014) in turn.

1. The structure and main content of the book

The book consists of a foreword, a main text, and a glossary about terms in the appendix. The main text is divided into four chapters, each of which presents a different topic and perspective. Below is a brief overview of the foreword and viewpoints of each chapter.

Foreword

Foreword covers the background of the book, as well as the development and critical ideas of the systemic theory

(systemics). The authors state clearly in this part that the book is still relevant because SFL is a "holistic approach" based on the thinking of context and system, i.e. SFL provides an overview of language as a whole before delving into the details. This indicates that reviewing the book is still of significant importance.

This part also introduces the origin and development of SFL, which was influenced by Firth's understanding about systems. SFL has gone through four stages: early 1960s → mid-1960s → late 1960s → from mid-to-late 1970s to now. The first stage is called the Scale and Category Grammar period, during which Halliday's grammar mainly focused on describing surface language structures. The second stage can be called the Systemic Grammar period, which emphasized that "system" is the primary paradigmatic organization of language. The third stage can be called the Systemic Functional Grammar period, emphasizing that the description of language's system and structure (syntagmatic organization) should be combined with three metafunctions (ideational, interpersonal, and textual). The fourth stage is still the Systemic Functional Grammar period, where language in context and society is focused based on the previous period. Moreover, SFL has become a comprehensive (general and applicable) linguistics that can not only be employed for ontological studies and language description or explanation (thus general), but be applied combined with other fields such as education, translation, computing, and artificial intelligence (thus applicable).

In addition, Foreword concerns several key concepts of SFL, e.g. language is social, contextual, semiotic, stratified, systemic, and functional. Besides, the distinction between language systems is not binary but a "cline". These ideas further lead to theory studies such as "contextual theory", "instantiation", and "grammatical metaphor".

The Body

The main research filed (grammar study), methods (paradigmatic system and multi-functional models), and perspectives (three-dimensional perspective) of SFL are introduced in four chapters. Chapter 1 roughly introduces "systemic grammar"; Chapter 2 builds upon this by introducing the "functional" dimension of systemic

grammar research; and Chapter 3, after expounding on "system+function" grammar, analyzes the relationship between system and text. The preceding chapters introduce grammar from the perspective of language itself, while Chapter 4 returns to "language/grammar in context."

1.1 *Chapter 1 Into systemic-functional theory of grammar*

Chapter 1 mainly distinguishes between the concept of grammar and grammatics, briefly describing SFL's understanding of grammar as a resource for creating meaning.

Grammar and grammatics. Grammar (or lexico-grammar) is the "wording" system of language, and different interpretations of this phenomenon form different grammatical theories. The study of grammar should be called grammatics, and Systemic Functional Grammar (SFG) is a type of grammatics that studies language.

Grammar is a resource rather than rule, which is the resource for construing meaning through wording, implying that SFG places more emphasis on systems: compared with structures that represent horizontal syntagmatic organization of language, systems represent the vertical paradigmatic relationship of language, which is actually a set of choices.[1] As choices, systems are probabilistic and potential resources for language users to construct meaning. Taking the mood system as an example, the MOOD system (Mood + Residue, such as *he will + come*; cf. Halliday & Matthiessen 2014: Chapter 4) is the grammatical resource for constructing interpersonal relationships and speech functions. [2] Its main choices include indicative and imperative moods, and we can explore its internal composition from three dimensions: "from below", "from around", and "from above".

(1) From below: This perspective fathoms the systematic contrast in a system from various aspects of wording, such as expression, structure, and phonetic/ phonological features. For example, the representative difference between indicative and imperative moods in the MOOD system is the distinction between clause structures — indicative clauses (e.g. *food is everything*) contain Subjects, while imperative moods (e.g. *pass me the salt*) generally do not.

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[1] The term "construe" means "construct semiotically" (Halliday 1998: 185).

[2] The name of system is capitalized in this article, while some special terms are initially capitalized.

(2) From around: This perspective explores the investigated system from other systems outside of it, including but not limited to its subsystems and simultaneous systems of the same larger system. (i) Explore the subsystems. The MOOD system has two main choices, indicative and imperative, but we can explore this system through more delicate subsystems. For instance, the indicative mood has two choices, "declarative" and "interrogative" (forming a subsystem below it), and a more delicate system will share some of the previous system's features, which can reflect the system's "entry condition" — while that of indicative and imperative moods are "clause", that of declarative and interrogative moods is "subject". (ii)

Explore its simultaneous systems. Other simultaneous systems with the same entry conditions (such as "clause") may also appear in the system network. For example, when selecting the MOOD system, it is inevitable to choose the POLARITY system, that is, the two options of positive and negative clauses. This further forms a complex system network that can be reflected by a matrix table (see Table 1); once an instance of the junction between two systems cannot be found, these systems cannot exist. The above two research perspectives actually demonstrate the scale of "delicacy" (from general to specific) and complexity (the interconnectedness of systems).

Table 1 The matrix of MOOD and POLARITY

		MOOD TYPE	
		indicative	imperative
POLARITY:	positive	The spy came in from the cold.	Come in from the cold!
	negative	They spy **didn't** come in from the cold.	**Don't** come in from the cold!

(3) From above: This perspective examines the meaning and its semantic features "realized" by a specific grammar system. Also using the example of the MOOD system, the meaning realized by it is related to the enactment of speech roles in a dialogue/negotiation, which is also associated with the commodities (information or goods-&-services) and directions (giving or obtaining) of the exchange. If the dialogue is intended to give information, we tend to use declarative moods; if obtaining information, we may use interrogative moods (these are just the congruent ways; for grammatical metaphor, see Halliday & Matthiessen 1999; 2004; 2014).

It should be noted that each of the aforementioned perspectives can be used to describe grammatical systems. However, the "from above" perspective may be preferred, i.e. exploring grammatical systems from a semantic perspective above. The major reason is that grammar realizes semantics: language, embedded in context, is a stratified system comprising semantic, lexico-grammatical, and phonological strata with the relation of realization. Based on this understanding, functional grammar is a meaning-oriented approach implying that grammar is a resource for creating meaning. Therefore, functional linguists naturally tend to explore systems from a semantic

perspective (Halliday & Matthiessen 2014).

1.2 *Chapter 2 Expanding the (dimensions of) lexico-grammatical space*

This chapter provides a preliminary exploration of three metafunctions of language (one of the theoretical foundations of SFL), and applies the semantic models of metafunctions both to paradigmatic and syntagmatic dimensions (system and structure). Besides, it also discusses the organizational principles and methods of system description, namely, using the scale of "rank" (rank refers to the hierarchical order of grammatical units, such as clauses, phrases, words, and morphemes in English — a higher rank of constituent is said to constitute the lower ones) and delicacy to describe systems and functions.

There are three metafunctions: ideational (experiential and logical), interpersonal, and textual. They can be realized at different ranks. Of those systems in different ranks, this chapter mainly focuses on metafunctions at the clause rank and the grammatical systems that embody each metafunction, such as the TRANSITIVITY system embodying the experiential function and the THEME system embodying the textual function (the MOOD system embodying the interpersonal function was introduced in Chapter 1). By locating systems and their relationships

based on the dimensions of metafunctions and ranks, a lexico-grammatical space can be construed, as shown in Fig. 1.

In Fig. 1, the vertical axis represents the rank of grammatical units, the horizontal axis represents the semantic models of metafunctions, and the spatial intersection of these two axes represents the systems in lexico-grammar (each system can further construct a network of systems). Therefore, the spaces at the clause rank in Fig. 1 refer to the MOOD, THEME, and TRANSITIVITY systems, respectively, each of which realizes a specific metafunction. The main chapter then proceeds to discuss metafunctions of the clause rank in (grammatical) system networks.

Grammar creates meaning through two highly abstract metafunctions, the interpersonal and ideational metafunctions that are related to external phenomena outside language (textual metafunction is purely linguistic). On the one hand, the interpersonal metafunction involves the grammatical resources (primarily the MOOD system) for the interaction between the speaker and listener in exchange, and for establishing general social roles, especially speech functions in interaction. On the other hand, the ideational (experiential) metafunction involves the grammatical resources for representing our external material and internal psychological world, as well as relations between things, with its main resource being the TRANSITIVITY system — it construes experiences through segmental configurations of a process, participant(s), and optional circumstance(s). Both of these functions are related to the social and natural world external to language, while the inherent function of language is the textual function (its own phenomenon). Textual function is about the creation of texts and helping construct ideational and interpersonal meanings based on the shared information between the speaker and listener in the context (primarily through the THEME system). How can this be realized? It does so by establishing a local context (clause context) through selecting a starting point for information progression (the theme) in the process of information development, providing the speaker with strategies for guiding the listener to understand the text. These three metafunctions are summarized in Table 2.
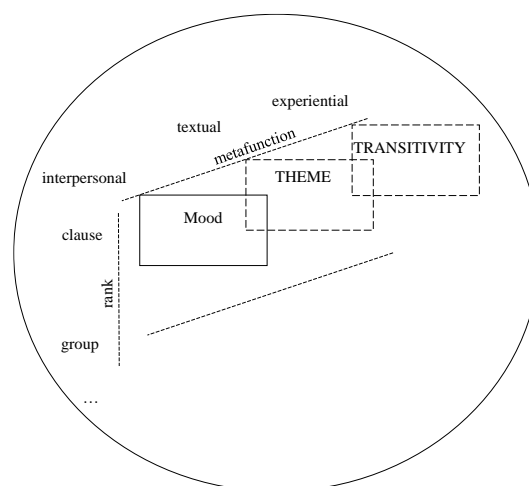

Fig. 1: Lexico-grammar expanded by metafunctions and rank

In addition, three metafunctions are simultaneous both in the dimensions of system and structure. On the system level, the mood, transitivity, and theme systems coexist in the overall system network of the clause, that is, metafunctions are represented in the entire system network as a set (similar to the simultaneity of the POLARITY system and the MOOD system as mentioned above). On the structure level, metafunctions appear simultaneously in three aspects or three levels of the clause structure, and they are fused with each other in structure (e.g. the Subject can overlap with the Actor). Based on these understandings, this chapter further elaborates the ideational and textual functions.

The ideational (experiential and logical) metafunction is the resource that constructs our experience of the external world and inner world, whose manifestation on the clause rank is the TRANSITIVITY system construing the experience of the phenomenon change through three constants: a process, the participants involved in the process, and the related circumstances. The constants (process and participants) in TRANSITIVITY are also variables, so the TRANSITIVITY system can be categorized by the types of processes and participants. Taking material processes as an example, we can categorize process types from the following three perspectives: (1) from above (category meaning): material processes construct "doings" and "happenings", including actions, activities, and events; (2) from below (structural representation): the configuration of material clauses is generally "Actor + Process (+ Goal +

(Recipient))", where the actor may be a person or a thing, but not a "meta-thing", i.e. a fact such as a nominalized clause (*that the earth moved broke the window* is impossible); material processes can also be further divided as "directed", and if they are directed, they may also be "benefactive" (cf. Halliday & Matthiessen 2014: 237); (3) from around (system correlation): material clauses are the entry conditions for many other systems (such as directedness and benefactivity above), but they do not intersect with the PROJECTION system, and the unmarked option in the TENSE system is "present-in-present" (*doing*) — the reaction of the TENSE system caused by this choice of transitivity process is called "reactance"; in addition, in categorization, there is no explicit marker to distinguish between different process types, that is, the process categories are covert or "cryptotype" (cf. Halliday & Matthiessen 1999: 26).

Regarding the variable of participant modes, we can distinguish between the transitivity mode and ergative mode according to how the participants affect each other. (1) Transitivity mode: by categorizing process types to determine different participant types (such as Goal, Range, Phenomenon, etc.); (2) ergative mode: based on the concept of Medium through the causative relationship, there are two choices, "middle" (such as Medium + Process: *the door opened*) and "effective" (such as Agent + Process + Medium: *the wind opened the door*). Note that these two modes are complementary, their balance being a major difference in the TRANSITIVITY systems of world languages (variants of languages). For example, there is the middle and effective contrast between mental processes in English (middle: *she liked the new musical*; effective: *the new musical pleased her*), while Chinese does not have such a distinction. The aforementioned content is actually the experiential metafunction. This chapter also expounds on the LOGICAL-SEMANTIC system that represents the logical metafunction, namely the EXPANSION system (elaboration, extension, and enhancement) and the PROJECTION system (locution and idea).

On the other hand, the textual metafunction produces resources for helping construe interpersonal and ideational meanings. It does so by organizing real-time information as an information unit that can be exchanged between the speaker and listener mainly through the THEME system.

The THEME system establishes a local context (clause context) in the textual environment, providing a starting point for information and an anchorpoint for the addressee to understand the information. This local environment that serves as the starting point is called the Theme, and other information expressed in this environment is the Rheme. Therefore, a clause as information is a configuration composed of two thematic statuses: Theme + Rheme (cf. Halliday & Matthiessen 2014: Chapter 3). More specifically, the Theme reflects the discursive status or prominence of the clause (from the prominent end of the Theme to the non-prominent end of the Rheme, constructing the clause as a wave in the information flow —from the peak of the Theme to the valley of the Rheme). In addition, the clause also embodies a complementary prominence (Information): the degree of newsworthiness from given information to new information. The Theme is expressed by the constituent order in the clause, while the new information is expressed by intonation. As a result of this, the Theme and Information are independent variables; however, under the unmarked condition, the new Information coincides with the last meaningful constituent in the Rheme. In addition, the THEME system and the INFORMATION system are related to the VOICE system "active/passive ", which can assign different textual statuses to different constituents of a clause.

Finally, this chapter mentions two principles for describing system networks, namely the scale of rank and delicacy. Rank (the hierarchy of grammatical units; the hierarchy between wholes and parts) is the principle that allows the distribution of lexico-grammar into different domains and units, resulting in systems being decomposed into interactive subsystems that are relatively independent of each other but are pre-selected. Delicacy (from more general to more particular) is a more covert principle that orders systems according to a cline and orders the manifestations of these choices according to their systemic environment (as shown in Fig. 1). Delicacy thus takes on the following features: systemic feature transfer (entry conditions), classification, and refinement. In addition, the principle of delicacy also organizes the entire lexico-grammar, where lexis is the most delicate grammar, and grammar is the most general lexis, thus forming a cline.

1.3 *Chapter 3 System and text*

The third chapter first introduces the matrix of metafunctions-ranks and its characteristics, and then identifies the relationship between the system and text, based on which it describes two general methods and principles for system description.

The grammar of every natural language can be summarized as a metafunction-rank matrix. See Table 2 for that of English.

Table 2 Function-rank matrix of English

	[class]		ideational			interpersonal	textual	(cohesive)
rank	[class]		logical		experiential			(cohesive)
clause		complexes (clause- phrase- group- word)	INTER-DEPENDENCY (parataxis/ hypotaxis) &		TRANSITIVITY (process type)	MOOD MODALITY POLARITY	THEME CULMINATION VOICE	COHESIVE RELATIONS:
phrase	[prepositional]				MINOR TRANSITIVITY (circumstance type)	MINOR MOOD (adjunct type)	CONJUNCTION	REFERENCE ELLIPSIS & SUBSTITUTION CONJUNCTION
group	[verbal]		LOGICAL-SEMANTIC RELATION (expansion /projection)	TENSE	EVENT TYPE ASPECT (non-finite)	FINITENESS	VOICE DEICTICITY	
	[nominal]			MODIFICATION	THING CLASSIFICATION EPITHETS QUALIFICATION	PERSON ATTITUDE	DETERMENATION	
	[adverbial]			MODIFICATION	QUALITY(circumstance type)	COMMENT (adjunct type)	CONJUNCTION	
word				DERIVATION	(DENOTATION)	(CONNOTATION)		
information unit		info. Unit complex	INFO. TAXIS	ACCENTUATION		KEY	INFOMATION FOCUS	
			complexes	simplexes				

This matrix reflects four characteristics: (1) Each cell represents a location (the point of origin) in a system network. Therefore, two systems that share the same "address" (such as MOOD and MODALITY systems) only

constitute one network. (2) Structures are manifested in ranks: each rank is a structural unit, and the function of the unit is often realized by members of the lower rank. (3) The common feature of grammatical representations is indeterminacy. Firstly, the structural representations of different columns are not always the same (e.g. the interpersonal grammar displays a layering of structure intermediate between the clause and phrase/group). Besides, there is also indeterminacy across columns (a system may stem from one metafunction, but be activated in another — VOICE derives from the ideational function but may be influenced by Theme and Information distribution). (4) Each network generates its structural output as a segmental configuration or other structural types, and the item (such as a clause) for description can be characterized in multiple functional forms.

The above passages all describe a task of grammatics: describing grammar. The task of grammar description requires the awareness that grammar is not arbitrary, but systems of choices. However, the task of grammatics goes beyond the description of systems. It also involves combining systems with instances or texts, and the latter relationship is called instantiation.

System and text are not completely different, but rather two perspectives on the same phenomenon, much like the relationship between climate and weather: we experience a set of synoptic phenomena as instances, referred to as the weather (the "text" in meteorology); when we look at it in the long term, in order to establish and explain the underlying rules of the phenomenon, we call it climate (the "system" in meteorology). Texts only make sense when they embody the potential of the system as instances, and systems are only effective when they are instantiated in texts. Each instance remains alive in potential, which on the one hand strengthens the system, and on the other hand challenges and changes the system. This complementary relationship between text and system is what we understand as a live language. The network representation of a systemic grammar is a way of modeling the potential in order to continuously evolve it. One aspect of this evolution is grammaticalization: the instantiation models in texts may gradually become part of the potential of grammar. When learning grammar, one can explore the cline of instantiation (Fig. 2), i.e. one can study any aspect of the cline: text,

register, or code.

Registers (contexts of situation) are functional variants of language that vary according to different contexts: formal or informal, technical or non-technical, more open or more closed. Codes (cultural contexts) are subcultural variants, the differences in text between different ages, genders, classes within a society, which are expressed through different semantic styles. Lexico-grammatical variants that arise from differences in registers and codes are "special cases", as they mostly concern relative frequency of occurrence of an item in the system, rather than the absence or presence of the item in the entire system (e.g., in some registers, the first and second person is rare, but this does not necessarily mean that one has to construct a separate grammar that does away with the PERSON system altogether).
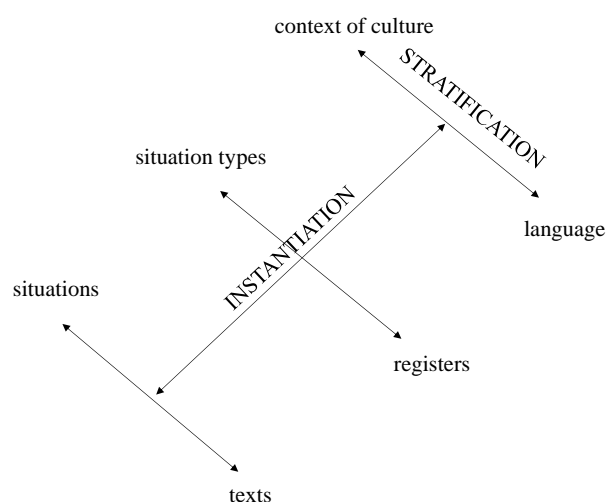

Fig. 2: Instantiation

Basic categories of scientific theory are difficult to be empirically verified because they form abstract models and establish a set of methods for exploration and explanation. Descriptive categories, on the other hand, are established by reference to some specific features of languages, and in principle, they can be verified: people can describe their features in specific ways to judge whether something is an instance, or whether certain categories actually exist in the system. These two methods (principles) are:

(1) Most general conclusions derived from grammar description are only valid within a certain probabilistic range (the choice system itself is probabilistic). These conclusions help identify exceptions, and then further

generalizations are sought for these exceptions; and this process repeats itself.

(2) System is described from three dimensions: from below, from above, and from around (cf. Chapter 1).

1.4 *Chapter 4 Perspectives beyond lexicogrammar*

This chapter firstly contextualizes grammar as a stratified environment. In order to make SFL more contextualized, it then relates to various grammatical theories and other schools (mainly the general Functional Grammar).

Lexico-grammar serves as a subsystem of language embedded within the context stratum, which is a set of systems that construes meanings through wordings. The system of meaning is called semantics; therefore, semantics is realized through lexico-grammar. Realization is a kind of relationship that abstractly orders the entire interconnected subsystems of language, such as semantics and lexico-grammar — lexico-grammar realizes semantics. Similarly, lexico-grammar is realized by the phonetic (sounding) or orthographic (writing) system, e.g. the delicate choices in the interpersonal MOOD system are realized through different intonations in spoken language: unmarked declarative clauses, for example, are realized through the falling tone. The three subsystems of semantics, lexico-grammar, and phonology thus comprise the language system (see Fig. 3), where grammar lies between the other two subsystems.
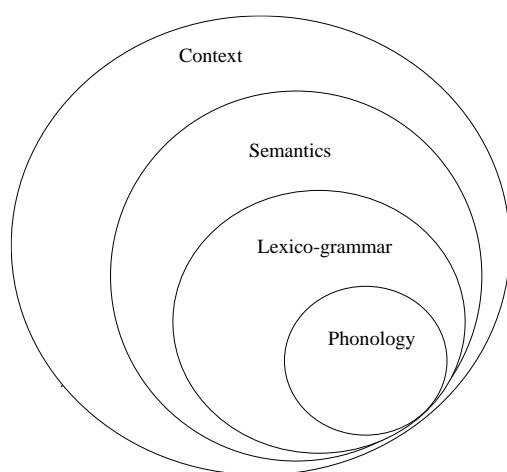

Fig. 3: Language as a stratified system embedded in context

However, note that the principle of stratification applies to ideational, interpersonal, and textual metafunctions, but it is not a general principle for inter-stratal relations: metafunctions only serve as the ordering principle for semantics and lexico-grammar (rather than phonology) — semantics and lexico-grammar construct the "content plane", while phonology forms the "expression plane" (cf. Halliday & Matthiessen 1999: 5). In other words, metafunctions construe the meaning model, rather than the writing or sounding model.

Language is not only stratified into the three subsystems noted above, but also manifests the hierarchical environment in which it operates, namely, context. Context is a higher-level semiotic system, into which language is "embedded": language is embedded in a cultural and social context through linguistic instances. Besides, context is realized by language — it both creates and is created by language. This realizing relationship is organized as regards the principle of functional diversity. Functionally, the context is divided into three domains: Field, Tenor, and Mode (influenced respectively by ideational, interpersonal, and textual metafunctions). (1) Field concerns what's going on (events), social processes, and the domains of subject matter created by language in these social processes; (2) Tenor concerns who's taking part in events — the social and communicative roles of participants, and the relationship between them and language creation; (3) Mode concerns what role language is playing in context, related to the distance between roles involved in communication through medium (e.g. spoken or written) and channel (e.g. face to face or telephonic), complementary with other social processes and rhetorical contribution (see Martin 1992: Chapter 7 for more details).

Furthermore, SFG shares some commonalities with general Functional Grammar, emphasizing function, rhetoric, text, and meaningfulness. However, it possesses these distinctive features: (1) SFG is paradigmatically-oriented, taking system (probabilistic choices) rather than structure as the basis, and the paradigmatic dimension is the overall organizing principle; (2) it regards language as a stratified system consisting of subsystems at different ranks; (3) it is comprehensive: systems have undergone changes in the scale of delicacy and the cline of instantiation; (4) it regards language as multifunctional, where interpersonal, textual, and ideational meanings on the semantic and grammatical strata are equally important. Meanwhile,

language construes these meanings as simultaneous systems and structures.

In conclusion, the book elaborates on the importance of grammatics with the relation between grammatics and language. The exchange of goods-&-services and information communication constitutes a dialectical relationship between physical and semiotic processes in human history. As physical systems are taken as prototypes in modern science, all systems are modeled into physical forms. In the "postmodern" information society, since we increasingly use semiotic models, we even interpret physical systems through meaning exchange. This makes grammatics the center of times, as it is not only a theory about grammar, but a theory about knowledge — in all systems, grammar is used to construe meanings (experiences) and then store knowledge. Moreover, grammatics implies using grammar to think, grammar being as a theory. Through this theory, we can apply our understanding of language to any phenomenon. However, no theory has achieved such a level. Thus, it is important to constantly develop the theory of grammar, so that it approaches more closely the interdisciplinary fields that people are concerned about.

II.   BRIEF COMMENT

From its content, we can observe that this book primarily introduces the research field (grammar), research methods (paradigmatic description of system networks and organization of functional meaning models), and research perspectives (three-dimensional perspective) of SFL, involving many core concepts such as grammar, grammatics, rank, delicacy, system, structure, metafunction, realization, stratification, context (register and code), and instantiation. This book and this article therefore contribute to increasing the interest of beginners in SFL and aiding their theoretical development.

Furthermore, this book embodies the following characteristics: (1) It regards SFL as a general linguistic theory, (2) it distinguishes between grammar and grammatics: SFG is the grammatics of studying grammatical phenomena, (3) it emphasizes the three-dimensional perspectives of language research, (4) it is explanatory: important concepts of SFL are defined and explained, (5) it is concise but progressively structured: it clearly explains systemics and SFG in context, using simple examples to explain research topics, methods, principles and theoretical foundations, step by step guiding readers, and (6) it is a "programmatic document": one of the main goals of this book is to expound on the overall principles or methods that should be followed when studying linguistic systems.

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